

## 2 Environmental Setting

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The following section presents a general overview of the planning areas of the City of Santa Barbara and surrounding region, physical setting, existing land uses, demographics, background, development patterns and growth management policies, and an outline of existing regional and City environmental plans and policies. More detailed descriptions of the environmental setting for each environmental issue area can be found in Section 4, *Environmental Impact Analysis*.

### 2.1 Location and Physical Setting

#### 2.1.1 Project Area

The City of Santa Barbara is located in the state of California on Santa Barbara County's South Coast; approximately 30 miles north of the City of Ventura and 75 miles south of the City of Santa Maria (Figure 2-1). Generally, the city encompasses approximately 12,636 acres (approximately 19.7 square miles) and extends from the Pacific Ocean on the south generally 3 to 5 miles north into the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains. The city's boundaries span approximately five miles from the Coast Village Road commercial corridor adjacent to the unincorporated community of Montecito on the east, to Hope Ranch and eastern Goleta Valley on the west (Figure 2-2). The city limits also include the 970-acre Santa Barbara Airport, located in the Goleta area, approximately four miles west of the city proper. However, no housing is proposed in the Airport area under the Housing Plan, and the Airport, along with offshore areas, is largely excluded from the area of analysis in the Program EIR.

#### 2.1.2 Land Use Setting

The majority of private land in the city is developed and remaining vacant land consists of scattered smaller parcels throughout the city, with a few larger vacant properties located in the foothills, Las Positas Valley, and the North La Cumbre areas. Many of these vacant properties have constraints such as steep slopes, sensitive habitat, limited access, and location within a high fire hazard zone. There are also hundreds of parcels throughout the city with additional development potential under General Plan land use and Zoning designations. These parcels include older, often single-story commercial or industrial buildings, larger public and private parking lots, and single-unit residences located on larger parcels designated for commercial or multiple-unit development. An example with existing development potential includes La Cumbre Plaza on upper State Street, for which the City has identified in the 6<sup>th</sup> Cycle Housing Element and Land Use Element as an area suitable for redevelopment and revitalization.

The city's sphere of influence is the area adopted by the City and designated through the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) to represent potential ultimate city limits, or areas that have the potential to be eventually annexed to the city. The unincorporated sphere of influence is generally coterminous with existing city limits on the east, and includes unincorporated lands on the north and west, particularly the communities of Mission Canyon and Hope Ranch, and commercial and residential areas along the west end of Upper State Street and Modoc Road. Unincorporated parcels also exist inside of the city boundary, along north La Cumbre Road and within the Las Positas Valley. The City follows applicable State laws, LAFCO direction, property owner wishes, as to whether or not to process annexations.

Figure 2-1 Regional Location



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Additional data provided by the County of Santa Barbara, 2021.

- City of Santa Barbara
- County of Santa Barbara



Fig. 1 Regional Location

**Figure 2-2 City of Santa Barbara, Sphere of Influence, and Coastal Zone Boundary**

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 Additional data provided by the County of Santa Barbara, 2021.

*Note: The portion of the City's limits that extend into the Pacific Ocean have been omitted from this figure for legibility. Please refer to Figure 2-1 for the full extent.*

### 2.1.3 Environmental Conditions

Physical conditions existing within the city generally include the following:

- The city is situated on a coastal plain and the lower foothills of the east-west trending Santa Ynez Mountain Range. Seismicity is typical of Southern California, with a number of smaller faults present within and near the city.
- The coastline is several miles long, with beaches that abut both low lying areas in the Waterfront area and coastal bluffs along the Mesa.
- The city is located in the South Central Coast Air Basin, which is located in central and southern California, bordered by Los Angeles County to the south and Monterey County to the north.
- Significant areas of open space and associated biological communities exist along beaches and within watersheds and estuaries, including the Las Positas Valley, multiple creeks, estuaries, and the foothills.
- High fire hazard zones extend down from the foothills and in coastal areas around Campanil Hill and the Mesa.
- The city contains sites of importance to the Chumash people, and numerous historic resources from the late eighteenth century through the twentieth century.
- The transportation system is comprised of the U.S. Highway (101), a few State Routes, and a well-connected series of arterial streets; the majority of area roads and intersections operate at a high level of service with some notable exceptions.
- The noise environment is dominated by vehicle noise from U.S. Highway 101, other roadways, and the Union Pacific Railroad.
- The City obtains water through a water supply portfolio consisting of water from Lake Cachuma, Gibraltar Reservoir, Devil's Canyon Diversion, Mission Tunnel Infiltration, the State Water Project, supplemental water, groundwater, and recycled water.
- The utility system consists of a potable water distribution system and wastewater collection system which conveys water to El Estero Water Resource Center. The city is provided natural gas and electrical power by the Southern California Gas Company and the Southern California Edison Company, respectively. Solid waste collection services are provided by MarBorg Industries.
- Numerous underground storage tanks and contamination cleanup sites are located in Santa Barbara and primarily concentrated in the downtown region.

Detailed descriptions of the environmental setting for each environmental issue area analyzed in this area can be found in Section 4, *Environmental Impact Analysis*.

## 2.2 State and Regional Planning Setting

### 2.2.1 State and Regional Planning

The city is located within several planning areas that attempt to limit cumulative impacts to resources by coordinating the planning efforts and related public services to distinct municipalities. As a result, the impacts of programs and policies in Santa Barbara must be considered within the regional context of these planning areas. These planning areas include:

- **State of California:** Through the Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (formerly the Office of Planning and Research), and the Attorney General, the State provides guidance and direction pertaining to long-time CEQA issues as well as emerging CEQA issues of State importance such as climate change and energy consumption. The California Coastal Commission oversees the Coastal Act of California, certifies the City of Santa Barbara’s Local Coastal Plan and amendments to the plan, and retains appeal authority of certain development permits occurring within the State Coastal Zone. The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) administers programs that provide grants and loans, creates rental and homeownership opportunities, monitors affordable developments that use HCD funding, implements standards for housing construction, assists California’s regions to determine their housing needs, and reviews each city or county’s Housing Element to determine whether or not their housing plan complies with state law, and produces California’s statewide housing assessment and California’s consolidated plan.
- **Tri-County:** Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services coordinates with adjoining offices of emergency services in Ventura and San Luis Obispo Counties. The Tri-County Coordinators meet and discuss regional preparedness several times throughout the year. The City of Santa Barbara is located in the South Central Coast Air Basin (Basin) and is under the jurisdiction of the Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District (SBCAPCD) a regional agency that implements the Clean Air Act. The Basin includes the entire area of San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura Counties.
- **Coastal Zone:** In addition to the California Coastal Commission’s oversight role for development of the City’s coastal zoned lands, the Beach Erosion Authority for Clean Oceans and Nourishment (BEACON) provides multi-jurisdictional coordination efforts in the maintenance, protection, and enhancement of the beaches within Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. BEACON tests many sand management and engineering strategies for shore protection and makes determinations about the success of each strategy. The City’s Coastal Land Use Plan was updated in 2019 to set in place interim development review policies to address the issue of sea-level rise and in February 2021, the City adopted a Sea-Level Rise Adaptation Plan which identifies areas of the City vulnerable to sea-level rise and recommends potential actions for adaptation.
- **South Coast:** The Metropolitan Transit District (MTD) provides bus services from Carpinteria to Goleta, UCSB and Isla Vista, with connecting services to outlying regions. MTD is a main form of daily commuter mass transit.
- **Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG):** A regional planning agency comprised of Santa Barbara County and all eight incorporated cities within the county. SBCAG distributes local, state, and federal transportation funds and acts as a forum for addressing regional and multijurisdictional issues. SBCAG is responsible for preparing a Regional Transportation Plan and Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS) every four years which determines the needs of the transportation system and prioritizes proposed transportation projects. The RTP/SCS has a preferred scenario that includes a future land use pattern for the region and identifies policies, programs, actions, and a plan of projects intended to meet regional transportation needs and policy goals, including a regional greenhouse gas emission target for passenger vehicles for 2035 and climate goal for 2050. State law requires the City’s Housing Element to be updated in coordination with SBCAG’s RTP/SCS at least every eight years. SBCAG receives a regional determination from the State Department of Housing and Community Development which states the minimum number of housing units the SBCAG region is required to plan for over the eight-year Housing Element period. SBCAG is responsible for

allocating a portion of the projected housing needs to each jurisdiction in the SBCAG region. The portion of projected housing needs for an individual jurisdiction is known as its Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA).

- **Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO):** The Commission is a State-created commission responsible for working closely with citizens, the County, cities and special districts within the County on a variety of issues concerning jurisdictional change. LAFCO's statutory purposes include the discouragement of urban sprawl and the encouragement of orderly governmental boundaries based upon local circumstances and conditions.
- **County of Santa Barbara:** The County of Santa Barbara provides agency services and facilities for City residents including: the County Flood Control District and Water Agency for management of surface flooding and drainage improvements, County Assessor's Office relating to tax property tax assessments and collections, and County Solid Waste Division for disposal of solid waste at both the Tajiguas landfill and the County Transfer Station. Additionally, coordinated planning efforts occur between the City and County within the City sphere of influence, located within the unincorporated regions of the County.

## 2.2.2 Legislation Related to Housing and Growth

The following provides background information on State and local legislation related to housing and growth management applicable to the Housing Plan:

- **Senate Bill 9 (SB 9):**  
SB 9 (2021) allows a proposed housing development containing two residential units within a single-family residential zone to be considered ministerially, without discretionary review or hearing, if the proposed development meets certain requirements. SB 9 also requires a local agency to ministerially approve an urban lot split in a single-family residential zone if it meets certain requirements, including a minimum lot size of 1,200 square feet. In both cases, the City may apply objective zoning, subdivision, and design standards. On December 14, 2021, the City Council adopted Municipal Code amendments to implement SB 9. In 2022, the Coastal Commission certified the amendments in the Coastal Zone for SB 9.
- **Senate Bill 35 (SB 35):**  
SB 35 (2017) requires jurisdictions that have failed to approve housing projects sufficient to meet their State-mandated RHNA to provide a streamlined, ministerial entitlement process for housing developments that incorporate affordable housing. Under SB 35, review and approval of proposed projects must be based on objective zoning, subdivision, and design review standards. In 2021, the City Council adopted Title 30 amendments and design standards for SB 35 projects.
- **Senate Bill 330 (SB 330):**  
SB 330 (2019), the "Housing Crisis Act," allows a housing developer to submit a preliminary application with a specific subset of information on the proposed housing development before providing the full amount of information required by the local government. Submittal of the preliminary application secures the applicable development standards and fees adopted at the time of application submittal. The project is considered vested, and all fees and standards are frozen unless the project changes substantially (by 20 percent or more of the residential unit count or square footage) or the applicant fails to timely submit a complete application. After an



application is deemed complete, the local agency cannot deny the project or approve it at a lower density if the project is consistent with objective standards.

- **By-Right Approval:**

By-right processing with no discretionary approval is required on sites identified in the 6th Cycle Housing Element to accommodate the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) if they were also identified, but not yet developed for housing in the previous 4th and 5th cycles, and at least 20 percent of the proposed units are affordable.

- **Senate Bill 166 (SB 166):**

SB 166 (2017) requires jurisdictions to accommodate their share of RHNA throughout the planning period. If a jurisdiction approves a housing development project on a site identified in the Housing Element inventory with fewer units than shown in the Housing Element, it must make findings that the remaining sites have sufficient capacity or identify and make available sufficient sites to accommodate the remaining unmet RHNA.

- **Housing Accountability Act:**

Passed in 1982 and strengthened over time with amendments, the Housing Accountability Act establishes the state's overarching policy that a local government cannot deny, reduce the density of, or make infeasible housing development projects, emergency shelters, or farmworker housing that are consistent with objective standards unless the City can make written findings that a specific, adverse health or public safety impact exists that cannot otherwise be mitigated.

- **Assembly Bill 2011 (AB 2011):**

AB 2011 (2022) creates a streamlined approval process for qualifying affordable housing projects located in commercial zones. It allows residential development on properties previously designated for office, retail, and parking uses without requiring discretionary approval, as long as projects meet affordability and labor standards. This bill aims to increase housing supply by repurposing underutilized commercial properties.

- **Senate Bill 6 (SB 6):**

SB 6 (2022) allows housing developments in areas zoned for office, retail, or parking uses, provided they comply with objective zoning and environmental requirements. Unlike AB 2011, SB 6 does not provide a streamlined approval process but expands the potential for housing development in commercial zones.

- **Assembly Bill 2097 (AB 2097):**

AB 2097 (2022) prohibits cities from requiring minimum parking requirements for residential and commercial developments located near public transit. This law aims to reduce costs associated with parking mandates, promote transit-oriented development, and encourage more affordable housing options.

- **Senate Bill 423 (SB 423):**

SB 423 (2023) extends and expands the provisions of SB 35, making the streamlined, ministerial approval process available for a broader range of housing developments, including those in the coastal zone. The bill enhances the ability to meet RHNA goals by ensuring that housing production remains a priority in high-demand areas.

- **Assembly Bill 2334 (AB 2334):**

AB 2334 (2022) modifies the state density bonus law to further incentivize affordable housing production by providing greater density bonuses and parking reductions for projects that include a higher proportion of affordable units. This bill supports increased housing supply by making density bonus provisions more flexible and attractive for developers.

- **Variable Density Ordinance:**

The City's Variable Density Ordinance applies in residential zones (R-M and R-MH), commercial and office zones (C-R, C-G, and O-R), manufacturing zones (M-C), as well as coastal-oriented zones that allow residential (CO-HV and CO-CAR). Variable Density provisions allow for potentially more units on a building site based on a prescribed set of ratios for number of bedrooms per lot area, rather than the more traditional residential units per lot area.

- **Average Unit Size Density (AUD) Incentive Program:**

The City's AUD Program is an ongoing program that was adopted in 2013 to facilitate the construction of housing units by allowing increased density that could not be achieved through existing development standards and by providing incentives to develop multi-unit housing. The AUD Program applies to both mixed-use and residential-only development.

- **Design Review:**

The City has three design review boards: the Architectural Board of Review (ABR), Historic Landmarks Commission (HLC), and Single Family Design Board (SFDB). ABR and HLC are established by the City Charter. The design review boards ensure that high standards of design are maintained in development and construction in the city. ABR reviews and approves commercial, industrial, and multi-unit residential projects outside of El Pueblo Viejo Landmark District and other landmark districts. HLC reviews and approves development within EL Pueblo Viejo Landmark District and other historic districts, and designates properties that have historic value. SFDB reviews and approves single unit residential projects.

- **Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Ordinance:**

In 2017 and periodically thereafter, the State legislature amended Government Code §65852.2 and added Government Code §65852.22 to ease development standards and facilitate the construction of ADUs. In 2018, the City adopted an ADU Ordinance, which has been periodically amended to be in compliance with State law.

- **Objective Design and Development Standards (ODDS):**

The City of Santa Barbara adopted Objective Design and Development Standards (ODDS) in February 2025 to provide clear, predictable guidelines for housing development. These standards apply to projects that qualify for streamlined, ministerial approval under State housing laws, ensuring high-quality design while complying with objective zoning, subdivision, and design standards. ODDS facilitate efficient approval processes while maintaining community character and architectural integrity.

- **Adaptive Reuse Ordinance:**

The City of Santa Barbara adopted the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance in November 2025 to facilitate the conversion of nonresidential buildings to housing.



## 2.3 Existing Land Uses

The City's Land Use Element contains goals, policies, and implementation actions related to the topics of Land Use, Growth Management, Community Design, and Neighborhoods. The downtown land use "grid" pattern, which features a major commercial corridor running north/south (more or less) surrounded by mixed use and residential neighborhoods between the ocean and the mountains, remains the dominant pattern today. Santa Barbara is largely a built-out city, with well-established neighborhoods and relatively few vacant parcels. The City has encouraged infill and redevelopment of existing commercial parcels, with a market driven emphasis on mixed residential and commercial projects.

The purpose of land use designations is to identify the planned land uses and residential densities within the city. These designations, when combined with specific locations on the General Plan map, summarize the community's vision for the physical development of the city. Santa Barbara's land use and transportation patterns have historically evolved in a sustainable manner with the highest residential densities at the center of the city adjacent to commercial and transit, with concentric rings of lesser and lesser densities.

Residential uses dominate the city and extend from the Mesa shoreline to the Cielito neighborhood high in the foothills. Residential uses range from one acre or larger estate lots in the foothills to predominantly single-unit homes in San Roque, the Mesa, Upper Eastside, and Las Positas Valley, to a mix of apartments, condominiums, duplex and single-unit homes on the Eastside and Westside. The higher density, multi-family neighborhoods adjacent to the commercial districts, followed by the medium density, duplex neighborhoods, followed by the single unit neighborhoods, followed by the hillsides, open space and ocean.

The distribution of land by General Plan land use designations reflects: the predominance of Single Unit residential areas (51 percent); Medium to High Density Residential (16 percent); Parks and Open Space (15 percent); Commercial and Office<sup>1</sup> (9 percent); Institutional including public schools (9 percent); and Industrial (1 percent)<sup>2</sup>. A breakdown of the distribution of land by General Plan land use designation is presented in Figure 2-3. The City's coastal and inland land use maps are depicted Figure 2-4 and Figure 2-5.

## 2.4 Circulation and Transportation Network

Santa Barbara's transportation system consists of roads, public transportation, bike and pedestrian facilities, parking, and City and regional programs that support and guide the use and development of these facilities, including programs to manage transportation demand. Congestion on most city streets is usually limited to the morning and/or evening peak commute periods at locations near freeway interchanges. Mid-day congestion on some local arterials (e.g., Upper State Street) and more significant regional congestion on U.S. Highway 101 also occur. Peak congestion periods in some locations have been lengthening. The automobile is currently the primary mode of travel for most trips to, through, and within the city of Santa Barbara and the surrounding region, and this is expected to remain true for the foreseeable future. However, public transit use is high for the size of the city, and a relatively large number of commuters also either walk or bike to work.

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<sup>1</sup> Multi-unit residences are permitted in areas of Santa Barbara designated for Commercial and Office land use.

<sup>2</sup> Multi-unit, two-unit, and single-unit residential are permitted in areas designated for Industrial use that are zoned Manufacturing Commercial.

Santa Barbara contains two transit priority areas, defined by Section 21099(7) to mean “an area within one-half mile of a major transit stop that is existing or planned, if the planned stop is scheduled to be completed within the planning horizon included in a Transportation Improvement Program or applicable regional transportation plan.” These transit priority areas are located at the MTD Transit Center at 1020 Chapala Street and the Santa Barbara Amtrak Station at 209 State Street and cover the Lower State neighborhood and portions of the downtown area. A large portion of Santa Barbara is also within ¼ mile of a High Quality Transit Corridor, as referenced by the SBCAG Regional Transportation Plan/ Sustainable Communities Strategy.

**Figure 2-3 Distribution of General Plan Land Use Designations**

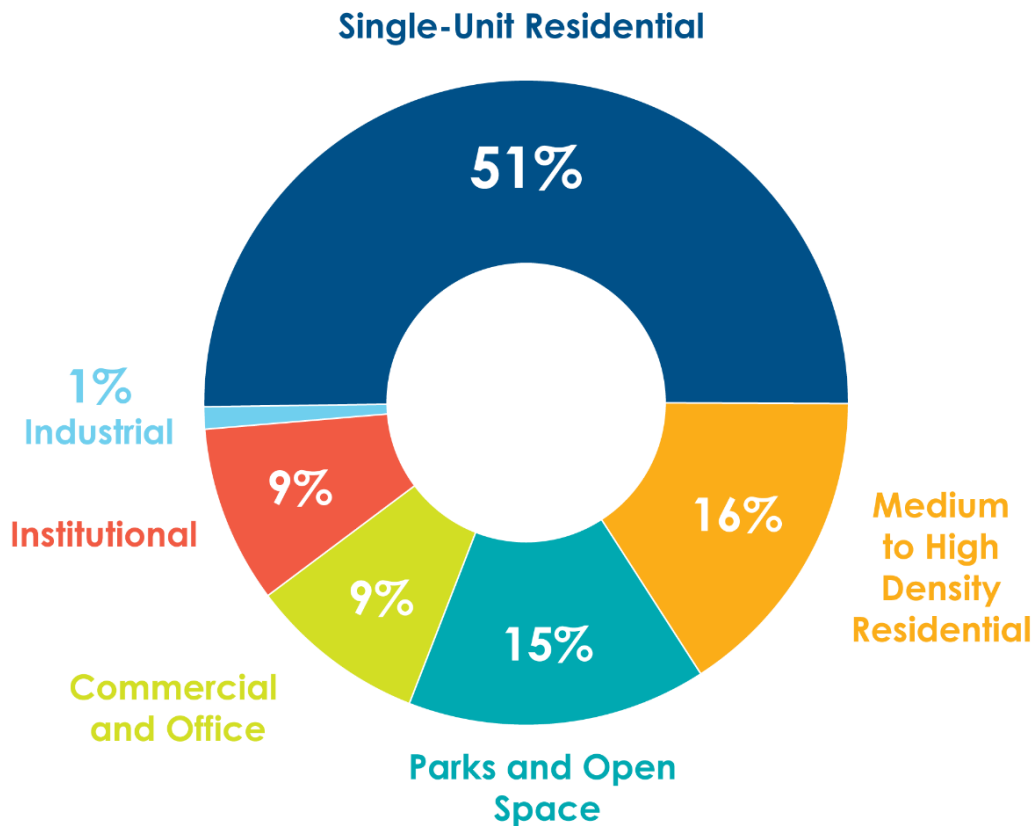


Figure 2-4 City of Santa Barbara Coastal Land Use Map

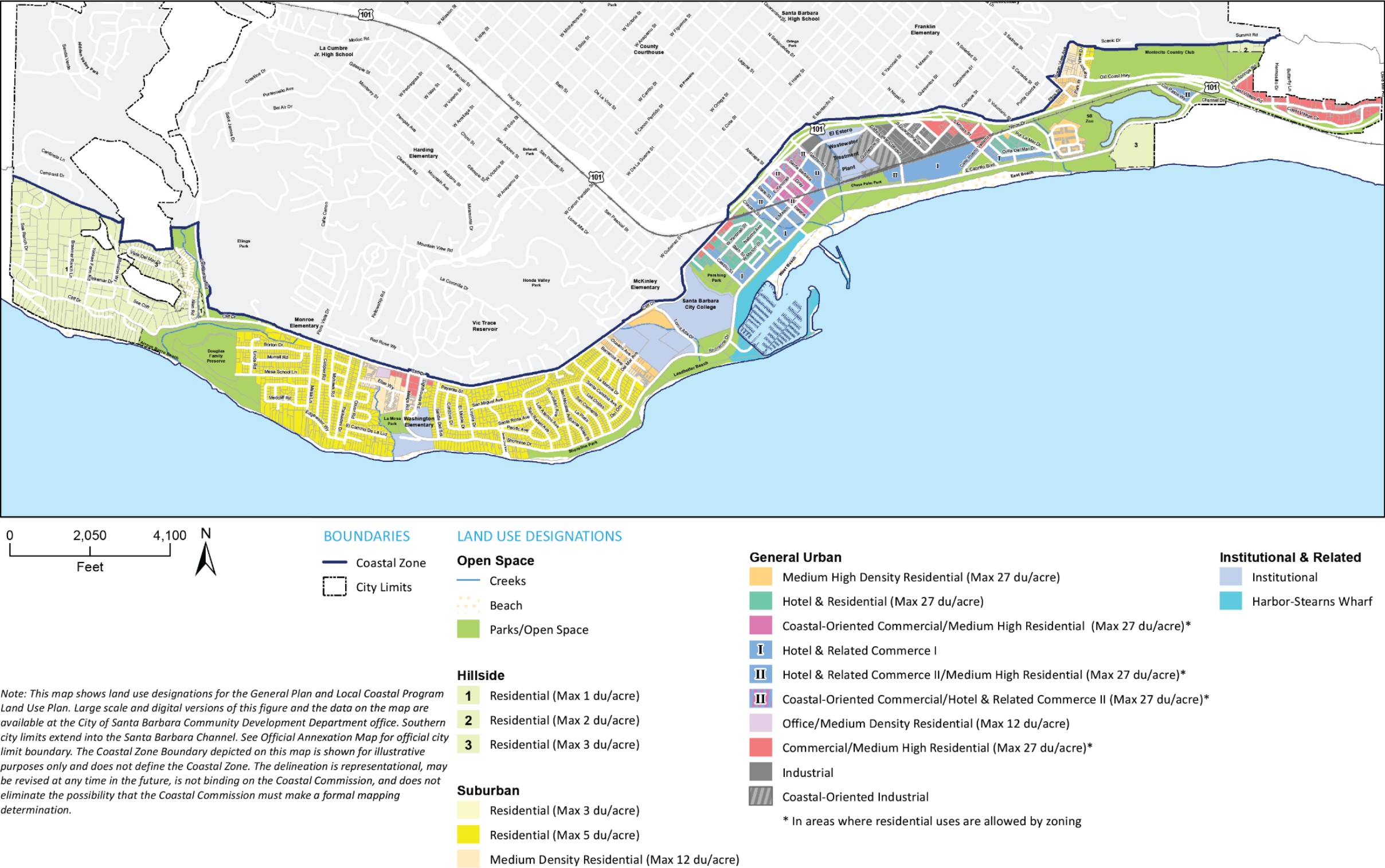
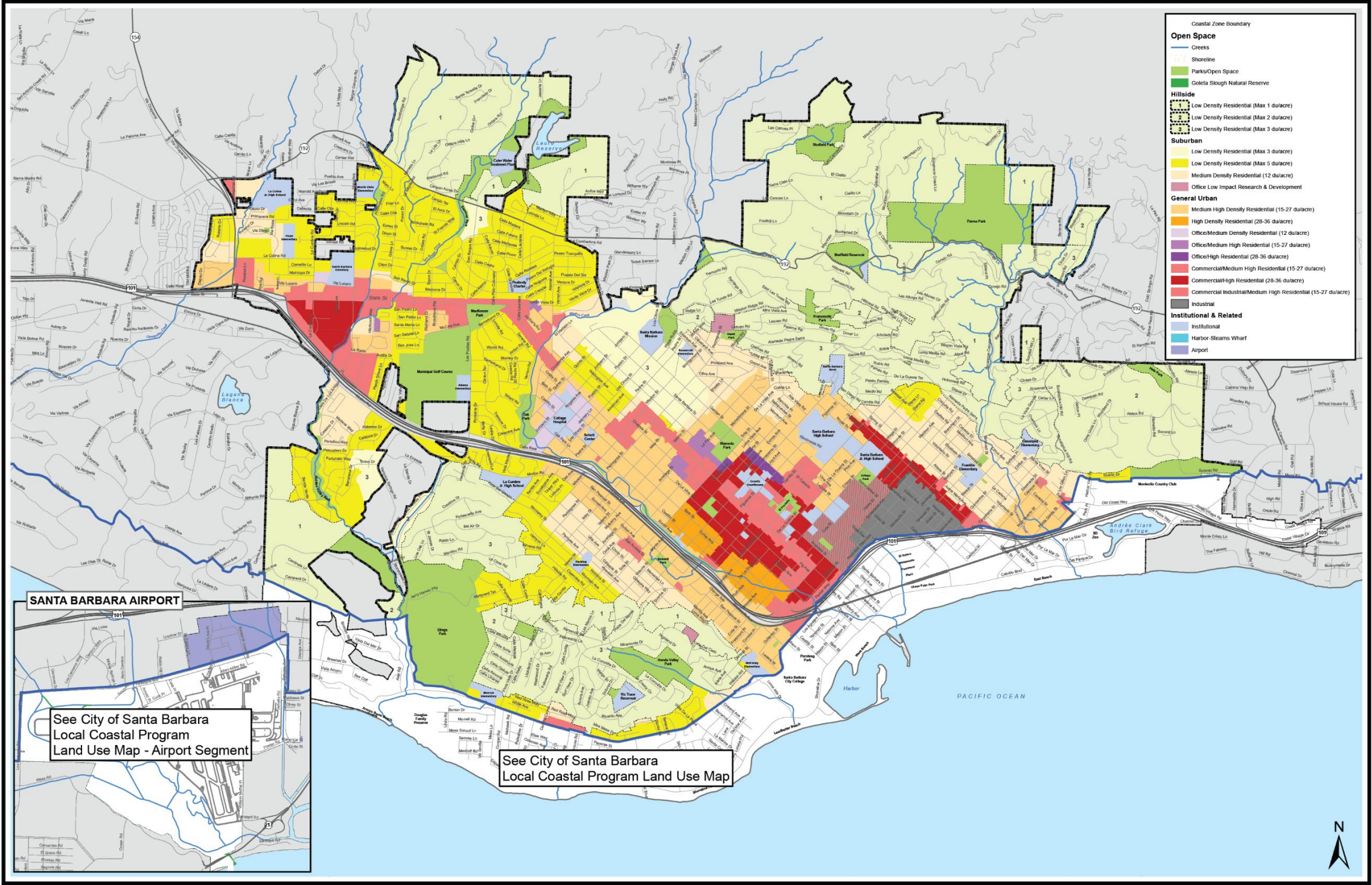




Figure 2-5 City of Santa Barbara Inland Land Use Map



Source: City of Santa Barbara, 2021.

## 2.5 Demographics

Major demographic characteristics of the City are noted below. Please refer to Section 4.11, *Effects Found Not to Be Significant*, for additional information relative to population and housing estimates and growth forecasts in the City.

- With over 86,000 residents, the Santa Barbara is the second largest city in Santa Barbara county and has the largest population on the county's South Coast.
- As a result of its robust job market and status as a tourist destination, the city receives a significant influx of daytime workers and visitors which can increase the daytime population.
- The median age within the city is approximately 39 years, compared to the county median of 33.8 years.
- Between 2015-2019, approximately 19 percent of city residents were less than 18 years old and approximately 19 percent were senior citizens over 65 years old.
- Between 2015-2019, approximately 56 percent of the City's population were considered white with no other race identified in their heritage. The largest ethnic minority was the Hispanic community with just over 37 percent of the population. Seven percent of the City's population belongs to another racial/ethnic minority group (United States Census Bureau 2019a).
- The largest job sectors in the City include educational services, health care, and social assistance, and the largest employers include Cottage Hospital, the County of Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara City College (SBCC), and the Santa Barbara School District.
- Between 2015-2019, the total employment within the City was estimated at 51,075 residents.
- Between 2015-2019, the unemployment rate was 2.8 percent, which is considerably lower than the County (3.9 percent), State (4.1 percent), and national (3.5 percent) averages (Census Bureau 2019b).
- Between 2015-2019, the City had a total of 39,932 housing units. This consisted of 18,894 one-unit detached residences, 2,843 one-unit attached residences, 2,452 two-unit residences, 3,143 three-to-four-unit residences, 3,803 five-to-nine-unit residences, 3,287 10-to-19-unit residences, 5,096 residences with 20 or more units, and 324 mobile homes.
- Between 2015-2019, 2,599 housing units, approximately 6.5 percent of total housing units, were vacant in the City. Of these vacant units, 386 were for rent, 218 were for rent but not occupied, 98 were for sale, 66 were sold but not occupied, 1,067 were for seasonal use, and 764 were classified as other vacancies.

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